Although in its beginnings Labour Day was primarily about work and workers, it has come to have different meanings for different people. For many it marks the end of summer and the return to patterns of life that will continue in one form or anther until spring of next year. For children at school or young people at College or University, it marks the beginning of a new year.

Because I have been a teacher almost my entire adult life, Labour Day evokes for me a sense of new beginnings. This weekend some 550 students are moving into residence at St Michael’s College. A large number of them are international students who bring with them the riches of their culture as they interact with ours. Although I have finished my formal teaching, I am still delighted to experience the beginning of a new university year and all that it means for the students.

Education has always been an important part of human life. Although its forms and its content have changed, and continue to do so, it remains a crucial period in the lives of those immediately involved in it as well as for the broader society. Education, like the world of work, has become more sophisticated and more specialized. We are all aware of, and benefit from, advances in science and technology. One need only think of how they have transformed so many areas of our lives, from health care and means of travel to electronic and social media.

The challenges facing us today as individuals and families and as part of humanity itself are enormous, beginning with climate change and its impact on our lives and on what Pope Francis likes to call our common home, the earth.

Alongside all the challenges associated with it, we can’t help but be aware of the growing anger and violence that have become such marked features of contemporary life. It is reflected in, and nourished by, political and social polarisation as well as by attacks on, and abuse of, women and children and ethnic minorities.

As COVID 19 has made clear, we need more, not less research and development in all areas of science and technology. The pandemic has also reminded us of our need for the humanities, for art, music and literature as well as for disciplines like history and psychology. Above all, we need to foster virtues and embrace values that build up human life both individual and social.

Today’s first reading is from one of several books in the OT which are associated with what is called the wisdom tradition of Israel. Wisdom was highly cherished in Israel as well as in the great civilizations, which surrounded it.

Those parts of the Bible, which deal with wisdom, focus to a large extent on practical and down to earth questions, questions about how to become a mature and responsible person, a good spouse and parent, someone who contributes to the well-being of the community of which they are a part. Biblical wisdom goes beyond this tradition to speak of the wisdom of God.

Even as we rejoice in, and marvel at, the great achievements in our day of science and technology, we recognize that their impact on us and on the world is often ambiguous. In order to overcome the negative use made of them, we need, not only to refine our scientific knowledge, but also to foster that wisdom which alone will allow us to use what is being developed in ways that will serve the great causes of peace, justice and human flourishing.

Technical knowledge without wisdom is a recipe for disaster. Simply because we can do something, like developing ever more sophisticated weapons of war, is no reason why we should act on it. That decision requires wisdom of a human and political nature.

Wisdom is a special form of knowledge. It involves the heart as well as the mind and is grounded in experience. It is the fruit of the coming together of experience and reflection on it.

Wisdom in this sense is something that we can and should learn to a great extent in our family. Given the focus in our culture on the young, it is not surprising that many tend to disregard the elderly as people who have little to contribute to the life of families and of contemporary society. We should cherish the elderly and learn from the wisdom, which they have been able to accumulate over the course of their lives. Anyone involved in education at any level –and that includes most of us – should do what we can to make it for our children and young people and for ourselves an occasion for growth in knowledge and understanding and in the virtues that are of the essence of true goodness.

Most of those who heard Jesus preach thought of him as a teacher of wisdom. His disciples came to recognize him as wisdom incarnate. The more we enter into what has been revealed to us in Christ, the more will we grow in that distinctive wisdom that Jesus embodied and that he came to share with us. Here, as with human wisdom, experience is essential. In this case, the experience is of God, Christ and the Spirit present in our lives and in the world, and, in a privileged way, encountered in prayer.